

LATEST DATA FROM ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS OF RATIARIA. ARCHITECTURAL COMPLEXES AND PROBLEMS OF THE STUDIES

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Summary. One of the largest and most important Roman military and civilian centres in the Lower Danube is Ratiaria. Today the ruins of this important ancient city are localized in the outskirts of Archar village, Vidin district.

In 2013 after a quarter-century break the regular excavation of this large Roman city was renovated. The most serious problem faced by new archaeological team was total plundering of the site conducted by treasure hunters in recent decades.

In the past two archaeological seasons our main work went into five distinct sectors: clearing, new detection and prospecting of the complex of "Residence"; fully excavated an unknown architectural complex - baths from late antiquity; detecting areas of the north wall and neighborhoods behind it; conduct searches and surveys of late ancient tombs from the northern necropolis of Ratiaria; field surveys and collection of architectural and epigraphic materials from the southern and western areas of the archaeological site.

In addition to the described complexes in front of the archaeological team of Ratiaria stand number of purely scientific problems:

- Finding of the location of the early military camp;
- Excavation and description of the urban street system of the Roman colony and of the late antique city;
- Studying of large baths of so-called "Imperial type";
- Finding of Episcopal complex and of early Christian churches from Ratiaria;
- Clarifying the fortification structures at the southern end of the Western Wall;
- The finding of the forum complex and the main temple buildings of the colony Ulpia Ratiaria of which have found architectural details, but the complexes themselves are not localized yet on the field;

There are huge problems in the studies of the closest environs of Ratiaria. For example, should be investigated in detail the zone of possible port of the roman military fleet. Have been no studies yet over the problems of canabae legionis, satellite settlements and villas around Ratiaria.

Keywords: Roman, Ratiaria, fortification structures, urban street system

One of the largest and most important Roman military and civilian centres along the Lower Danube is Ratiaria. Today the remains of this important ancient city locate in the outskirts of Archar village, Vidin district. The archaeological site is outstretched in the so-called area "Kaleto" ("Fortress"- eng.), in the north-west end of the Turkish quarter of Archar, very close and almost parallel to the coast of Danube river.

In the borders of the original Roman province Moesia Ratiaria arises as a military camp at the beginning of 1st c. AD¹. At the site resided different Roman troops, probably *vexillationes* of Legio IV Flavia and Legio VII Claudia, and also here it had a base of the Roman river military fleet². After the Dacian Wars (AD 101-106) Ratiaria was promoted by Emperor Trajan in the status of colony: *Colonia Ulpia Traiana Ratiaria*³. At the end of the 3 - 4th c. AD Ratiaria became the capital of the newly established Roman province of *Dacia Ripensis*.

In the year of 2013 after a quarter-century break the regular archaeological excavations of the Roman military centre, colony and the provincial capital Ratiaria was successfully restored. Initiators of these new studies are National Archaeological Institute and Museum at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, through its Department of Ancient Archaeology, and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria. The new research team is composed of: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zdravko Dimitrov (NAIM-BAS), the head; Assoc. Prof. Ivo Topalilov (Shumen University) and Ilko Tsvetkov (RMH-Vidin), deputy heads of excavations.

New researchers of this important site directly continue the work of the last team of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Regional Museum of History in Vidin and the University of Bologna, Italy, which is systematically excavated Roman Ratiaria before. This Bulgarian-Italian expedition working in Archar from 1976 to 1989, as in the last few campaigns of 80ties, it is under the guidance of prof. Velizar Velkov (Director of NAIM-BAS) and epigraph prof. Maria Bollini (member of the University of Bologna).

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¹ V. Dinchev, RATIARIA. From Colonia Ulpia Traiana Ratiaria to Anastasiana Ratiaria in R. Ivanov (ed.), *The Roman Cities in Bulgaria*, vol. II, forthcoming, with complete bibliography on the problem.

² *Ibidem*.

³ CIL, III, 14 499.

The most serious problem faced by new archaeological team was total plundering of the site from looters, carried out in recent decades. Today there is no other field data and benchmarks from previous excavations, conducted by the Italian-Bulgarian team in the 80ties of the twentieth century. Some of the studied architectural complexes are even almost completely destroyed. The whole terrain of the archaeological site *Ratiaria* was covered by embankments and trenches from this unauthorized activity. At the beginning of our excavations there wasn't any trace of the old archaeological base, nor also preserved parts of the well beaten approaches of the rough roads to the studied complexes. The so-called complex of "Turkish Cemetery", placed in the centre of the ruins of ancient *Ratiaria*, is also already completely destroyed by the looters. The scientists excavated the site before supposed that right in this quarter should be sought the forum complex of roman and late antique *Ratiaria*⁴.

In the past two archaeological seasons our main work went into five separate sectors: clearing, excavating and prospecting of the complex of "Residence"; full excavations of one totally unknown architectural complex – baths from late antiquity (*Roman thermae*); studying of the areas of the northern wall and the neighbourhoods behind it; field surveys and documentation of the late ancient tombs from the northern necropolis of *Ratiaria* and field surveys combined with the collection of architectural and epigraphic material scattered on the ground from the southern and western areas of the archaeological site (see: Fig. 1 – general plan of the new excavations).

In the largest architectural complex of *Ratiaria* – "Residence" of the provincial governors of province *Dacia Ripensis*⁵ – were held our large-scale studies. In the beginning of the excavations the whole building and its surrounding areas were in extremely bad condition. We found some broken walls, fallen on the terrain, other parts of the complex were buried under embankments from the treasure-hunter activities, and the street (*decumanus*) along the north side of "Residence", well visible in the 80s⁶, is almost completely destroyed – the stone slabs are totally overturned (Fig. 2). In the central areas of this large complex we reached the level of the studies from 80s. Most important, however, were studies in the eastern end of the complex where our researches succeed to make huge sondage under the well preserved level of bricks in premises Nr. 4 (see again: Fig. 2). There we found specific and very important stratigraphic data about the construction periods of the Residence.

Under the brick-level were found various levels of reconstruction of the complex in its different construction periods: especially well-preserved columns and foundations of *hypocaust* system (Fig. 3).

In the area, where are preserved the pillars of the residence hall from early Byzantine period (3rd construction period, according to Kuzmanov), is revealed large amounts of early Roman pottery from the first stage of the complex, as well as preserved parts of the mosaic panels (Fig. 4 and 5). At the end of the excavations in 2014, it is possible to mention that we updated general plan of Residence and at the moment we documented the current state of this huge representative complex of *Ratiaria* (Fig. 6).

In the year 2013 only 30 meters to the north of the Residence the team found a completely new, unexplored architectural complex of *Ratiaria*. This is the bath (*thermae*) of the late Roman period (Fig. 7). It is composed of three absidal-shaped rooms. They are oriented to the south and it is certain that there are the most southern areas of these baths. As functions they are executed in the *thermae* like the rooms with the warmest water supply - ie. *caldaria*. Inside in bath construction are placed also few small pools (*piscinae*) – some of them embedded in the outside walls (Fig. 8).

Inside the interior parts of the absidal-shaped rooms are located benches, on which bathers sat. In the westernmost room № 1 is preserved an essential part of the *hypocaust*, which gives a good idea of the system of water heating and of the entire interior of the *thermae*.

This late antique bath in *Ratiaria* is dated back to the period 4 - 5th c. AD, according to the ceramic and numismatic materials. Especially valuable data our team acquired for decoration and interior design of the baths. It was paved with marble tiles and slaps, and also with mosaic floors, which have been implemented by individual hexagonal ceramic fragments. In the baths there were several architectural details, among which stands out the large marble base in Ionic style.

Our research in the central part of *Ratiaria* turned also to the north. In this area through well-organized "breakthrough" in the treasure-hunter embankments we reached the north wall of the Roman city, which is completely unknown and unexplored. The only one data that we have so far for the fortification of *Ratiaria* are from the western wall – more precisely from its western gate and adjacent towers⁷.

⁴ D. Giorgetti. *Res ad topographiam veteris urbis Ratiariae perinentes. Prolegomeni all' urbanistica della citta romana in Ratiariensia*, 3-4. 1987, pp. 33-84.

⁵ G. Kuzmanov. *A Residence from Late Antiquity in Ratiaria (Dacia Ripensis)* in *Archaeologia Bulgarica*, IV, 2000, 1, p. 41. fig. 3.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 28. fig. 4.

⁷ J. Atanasova, A. Popova-Asenova, *Il muro di cinta di Ratiaria, lato occidentale. Ricerche archeologiche 1976-1985 in Ratiariensia*, 3-4. 1987, pp. 85-96.

In studies of the north wall we found that this fortification structure was completely "broken", probably by using of stones for new building materials. These conclusions are valid at least for the districts in quarters F III / G III, where we have delivered our studies in 2014. Stratigraphic data in our researches showed that the most likely this robbing of the wall for reusing of the stone materials occurred even in the nineteenth century. This is a process that is witnessed in almost all Roman cities in Bulgaria, especially those that are located in the Lower and Upper Moesia. The majority of villages in the Renaissance era were built from the ruins of the ancient centres.

Moreover, the relatively "early" plundering of the stone structures of the north curtain wall, in this area over the last 20 years worked treasure-hunters, using also heavy bulldozers. Their activities also contributed to the complete dismantling of the wall, even in its foundations. Therefore, in the profiles of stratigraphic sondages we found the main trench of the wall, large parts of its debris, but not a stable structure of *super-* or *substructions* (Fig. 9).

The most valuable purely archaeological data from these new excavations of *Ratiaria* we found, however, in small quarters behind the northern wall. In the area of about two acres is excavated several buildings that were not destroyed by the looters (Fig. 10). They are built over the foundations of well compacted boulders. The walls step over these foundations and they are made by the well-cut stone blocks. Every building is "lined" outside with adobe and ends with dry coated clay structure.

Between buildings that are obviously related to the fortification of *Ratiaria* detect small passages. These short and narrow passages are covered with rubble and roughly processed stones. Best find here was bronze coin – *quadrans* of Emperor *Augustus* (posthumous of the *Julius Caesar*), which we found *in situ*, just behind the main trench on the northern fortification wall (Inv. Nr. 412; found in: qu. G III/71).

Stratigraphic data here show perfect that over the ruins of the buildings, behind the northern wall, life in this quarter of ancient *Ratiaria* ends with a big layer of burning on the whole area. The layer contains debris of adobe from the walls and a large level of burnt organic remains from the roofs and floors of the buildings. Probably the buildings were destroyed in the middle of the 5th c. AD. Most likely all these happened in the Hun invasions in Moesia, because we couldn't find in the layer under this burnt houses bronze coins latter than the reign of Emperor *Theodosius II* (408-450). G. Kouzmanov also connects one of the reconstructions in the "Residence" with Hun invasions, probably after the second ravage of the Huns in *Ratiaria*, led by Attila in 447-448 AD⁸.

In the other two areas, which held our studies we had success in terms of acquisition of new data for the architecture in *Ratiaria*, especially about the period of Roman Imperial age, and particularly as regards the collection of a lot of new data for ceramic production.

We collected more than 15 architectural details. Most of them come from the complex of largest baths in *Ratiaria*, these from so-called "Imperial type". For example: a whole block of pediment complex (which probably originates from the temple complex; see: Fig. 11); whole Corinthian cornice (Fig. 12); basic details and Corinthian capitals (Fig. 13).

In the studies of epigraphic monuments, in 2014 we found two very important inscriptions. They are dedicated to the goddess *Diana* and they are placed by the orders of the governors of Moesia province. Both dated in the second century AD.

Also very important are the finds of ceramic complex. Among these are pretty good data on production and distribution in the Danube limes of the most luxurious Roman pottery - *terra sigillata*. Although more of the artefacts are heavy fragmented find, they are with valuable data for the science and in very good quality.

Some of the best finds are bottom pieces of *sigillata* manufacturers with its stamps in the form of *planta pedis*. Particularly important are the vessels and fragments of stamps from Italic manufacturers. The most common producer is *Lucius Gellius*. This fact is normal, based on previous data that we have from whole Moesian lands⁹. The formulas of the stamps are currently two types - L.GEL or L.GE. They are found in other early legionary camp on the Lower Danube (*Oescus* and *Novae*), dated back to the Tiberian-Claudian times¹⁰. Same forms and stamps type "*planta pedis*" are known also by *Ratiaria*, found in the time before looting of the object in the late twentieth century¹¹.

⁸ G. Kouzmanov. *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁹ A. Dimitrova-Milceva. *Terra sigillata und dünnwandige Keramik aus Moesia Inferior (Nordbulgarien)*, Sofia, 2000.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*. Abb. 2. Tab. 3.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. p. 44. Nr. 21. Abb. 2.

Among the data about the producers from Italic lands are also Iulius (see: Fig. 4) and Clodius.

Between the new data from ceramic complex are also the first registration here of the presence of *Clodius* production. Absolutely for the first time in the area of Lower Danube limes (Fig. 14). There are also data from the so-called “*relief terra sigillata*” – containing divine images and zoomorphic and floral scenes (Fig. 15).

In 2013/14 we have made some little survey in the closest vicinity of the object – mainly in the northern necropolis of *Ratiaria* – located in area called “Yaliata”. It is entirely along the Danube River and very close to the northern wall of the ancient city. In the zone of the so-called “Roman villa” of the 2nd century AD, studied by Italian colleagues in the 80s of XX century, now are well preserved two early Christian tombs with semi-cylindrical vault (Fig. 16). Research in this area is extremely urgent, particularly important is the rapid restoration and expert archaeological activity in the area of the tombs.

In addition to the described complexes above Ratiarian team faced in front of a number of purely scientific problems:

- Finding the location of the early military camp of *Ratiaria*. Today, our research has shown that under studied areas in “Kaleto”, like “Residence” complex, late antique baths and surrounding areas, we have **no** any archaeological evidence of archaeological structures from pre-metropolitan period of *Ratiaria*. Most likely the remains of the first military campus and its successor, the Roman colony of Trajan, are located in another area of the site;

- We need to set the accurate scheme of the urban street system of late antique city, the capital of Dacia Ripensis. Today we have direct evidence for *insula* in the range of 30 to 35 meters wide. But so far our studies “detected” only streets in east-west direction, so-called: *decumanus* streets, but not any evidence for the streets to the north (*cardo*);

- Excavations of the largest baths (*Imperial thermae*). This is perhaps the biggest problem from an architectural point of view. Nowadays we have data only from aerial photographs, made in the 70s of XX century, and the current state of the field, show us clearly that this is most likely the largest Roman baths in today's Bulgarian lands;

- Finding and excavations of the episcopal complex and of early Christian churches in *Ratiaria*. We have plenty of historical data for the Bishops of *Ratiaria*¹², but no any evidence from archaeological excavations. The low level of studies is the main reason that now we don't have any Christian church, the bishop's residence or at least part of the adjacent buildings registered on the terrain;

- Clarification of the fortification structures at the southern end of the Western wall. This is the biggest problem in fortification studies, because of the lack of information about the southern wall of the city. Therefore, the whole from of the fortified area today are in fact unclear. Even more obscure are the construction periods and the history of fortification. The only data gives Yordanka Atanasova about the zone of western gate and adjoining towers. She dated all structures there from the beginning of the 2nd c. AD¹³. We think that this chronology must be confirmed by new stratigraphic studies, as inside the area of “Kaleto”, where we do not find levels and building that can be dated back before the end of the 3rd c. AD, metropolitan period of *Ratiaria*;

- Finding and excavations of the forum complex and the main temple buildings from Roman colony of *Ulpia Ratiaria*. Nowadays we have found certain architectural details¹⁴ from these kind of buildings, but the cult and most representative public complexes of the colony themselves are not localized yet on the field;

- Especially big problem in studies of the region of *Ratiaria*. For example, should be investigated in detail the area of possible Ratiarian river port – this of the Roman Danubian fleet. It has been no studies or even surveys in search of *canabae*s and satellite settlements, *vicuses* and *villas* around *Ratiaria*.

For example, in recent years after an interagency committee of the Ministry of Culture in the secured area of *Ratiaria* include one of the largest cemeteries – this in area “Babuya”. This region was also robbed from many years, without an initiative by the local government for his defence. The other two necropolis of *Ratiaria* – the western, in the area “Parlozite” and the northern, in the area “Yaliya” also need urgent intervention of archaeologists and restorers. In these areas, the treasure-hunter interference is a serious problem even today, despite obvious progress regarding site security and initiatives for the protection of cultural monuments.

¹² see: V. Dinchev, *op. cit.*

¹³ J. Atanasova. Археологически проучвания на западната крепостна стена на Рациария (1976-1985) in Известия на музеите в Северозападна България, 23, 1995, 59-85.

¹⁴ Z. Dimitrov, *Architectural Decoration in the Colony of Ulpia Ratiaria* in L. Vagalinski (ed.), *Proceedings of the XXII Limescongress. Rousse. Bulgaria*, forthcoming.

Last but not least, based on our contacts with Romanian colleagues, it is appropriate to start studies over the relationship of the campus and latter colony of *Ratiaria* with the Trans-Danubian structures of the Roman Limes system. For example, it is very important and totally unexplored what were the relations and mutual contacts with the Roman centre of *Desa*, which is located directly opposite to *Ratiaria* over the Danube, and just 10 km. to the north.

This, of course, are only the main problems facing the new research team of this important Roman military and civilian centre on the Lower Danube limes. In general the basic idea is the archaeological excavations of *Ratiaria* to be continued in the coming decades with even greater pace and by bringing in many new, completely unexplored areas.

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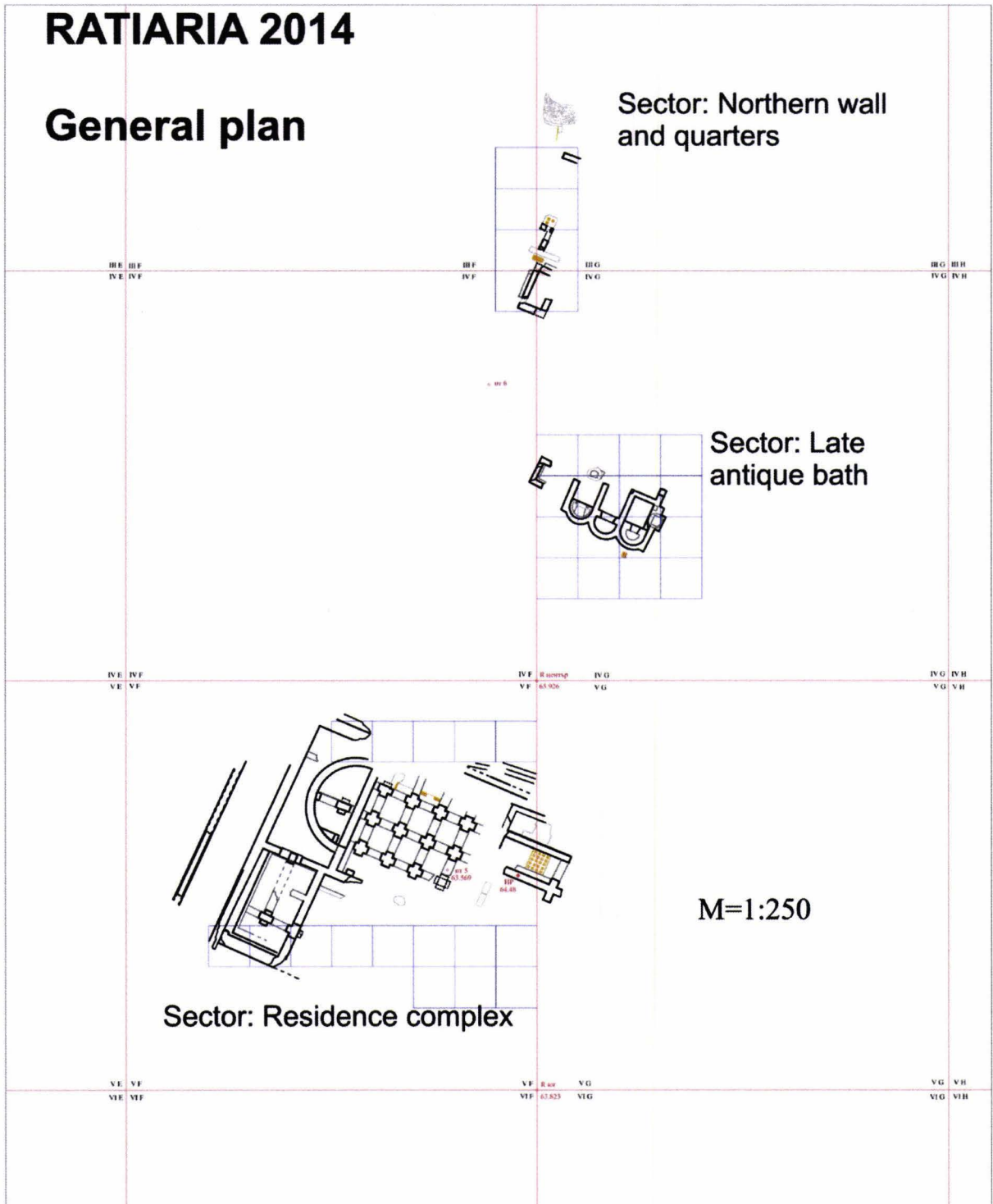


Fig. 1. General plan of the newest excavation sectors in the central part of “Kaleto” – ancient *Ratiaria*.



Fig. 2. The “Residence” complex – northern wall with destroyed slabs of the decumanus from the north.
Bricks level in the premises Nr. 4 to the right.



Fig. 3. The “Residence” complex – *Hypocaust* system in premises Nr. 4.

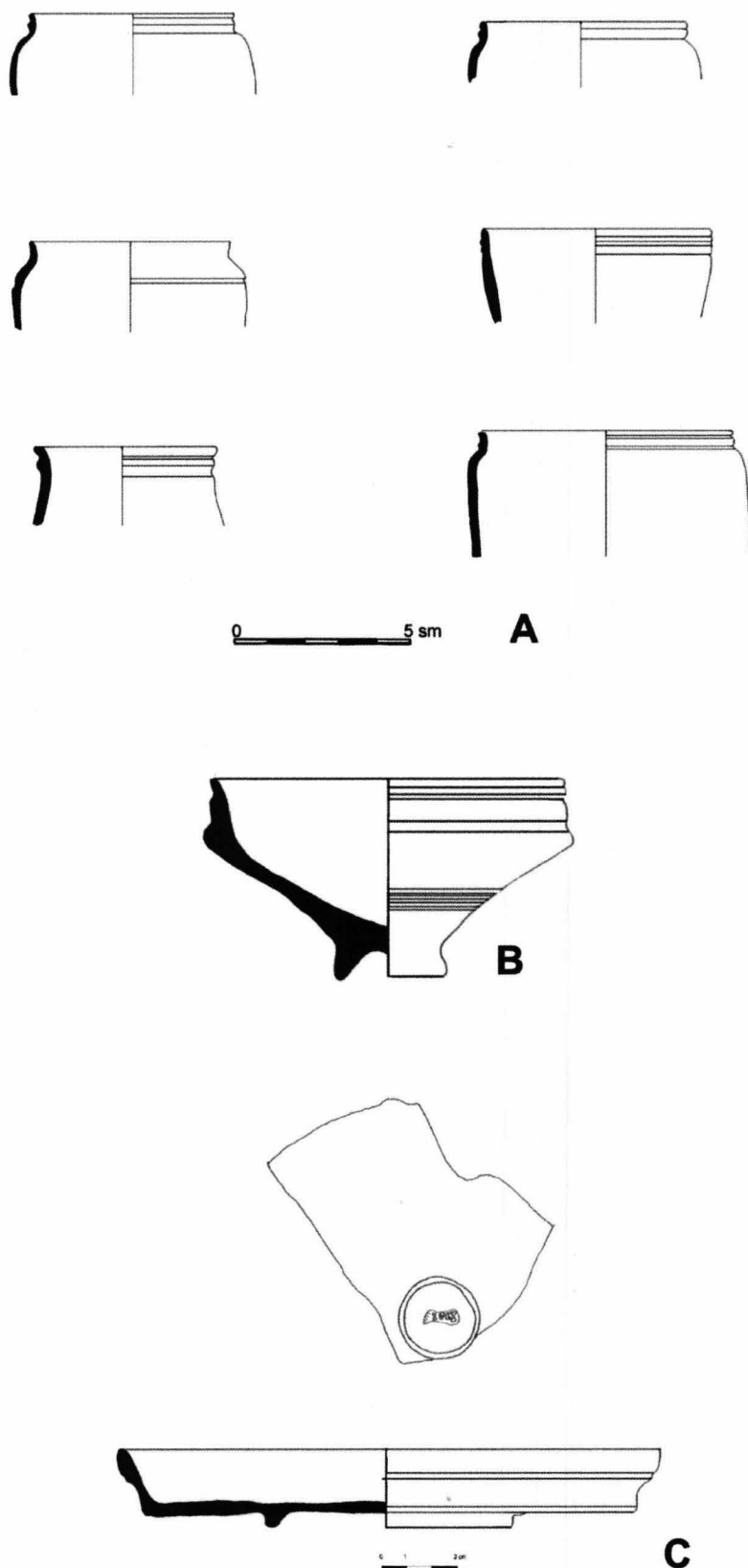


Fig. 4. The "Residence" complex – ceramic materials from earlier periods:

A. red slipped thin-walled ware;

B. red slipped bowl;

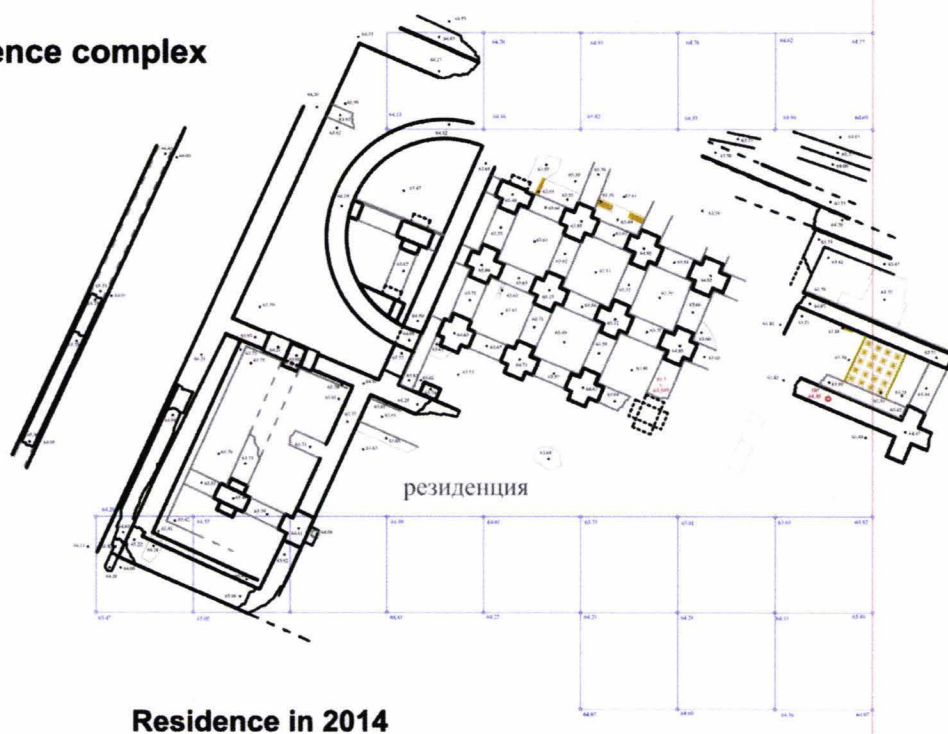
C. *terra sigillata*, form D 17 with the stamp in form of *planta pedis* – manufacturer: *Iulius* (graphics: Nikolay Rusev).



Fig. 5. The "Residence" complex – fragments of the mosaic panels in the central part – detail.

RATIARIA 2014

The Residence complex



Residence in 2014

M=1:100

Fig. 6. The "Residence" complex – current general plan after the excavations in 2013-14.

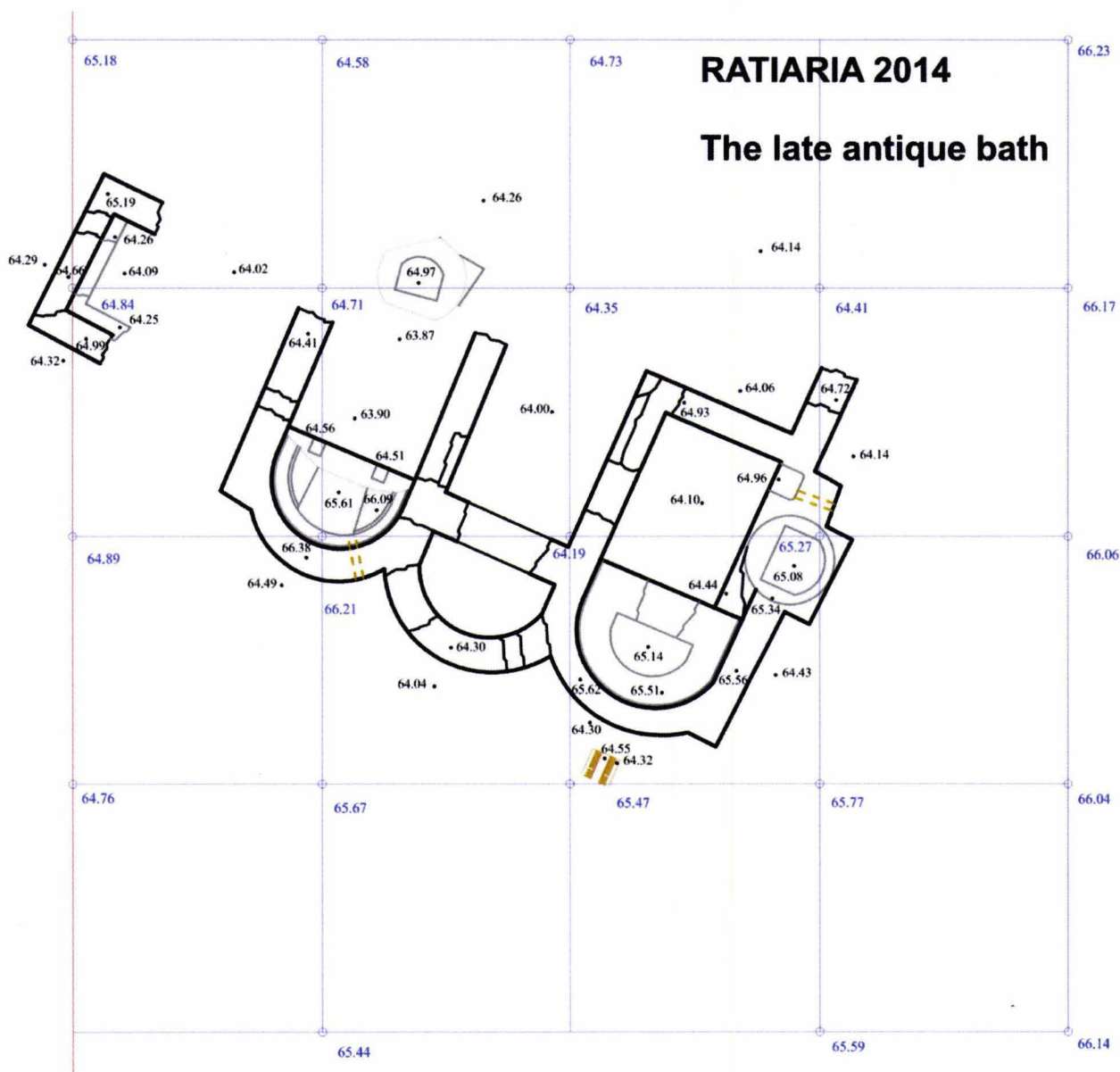


Fig. 7. The late antique bath in *Ratiaria*, excavated 2013-14 – general plan.



Fig. 8. Best preserved wall of the *thermae* eastern part, with one of the little *piscinae*, embedded in the construction.



Fig. 9. The trench of the fortress wall in the northern sector.



Fig. 10. The buildings behind the northern fortress wall foundations and structures of the walls, general view.



Fig. 11. The upper pediment detail – Corinthian order.



Fig. 12. Whole Corinthian cornice – corner detail in monumental construction.



Fig. 13. Whole Corinthian capital from half-column facing the wall detail in monumental construction.

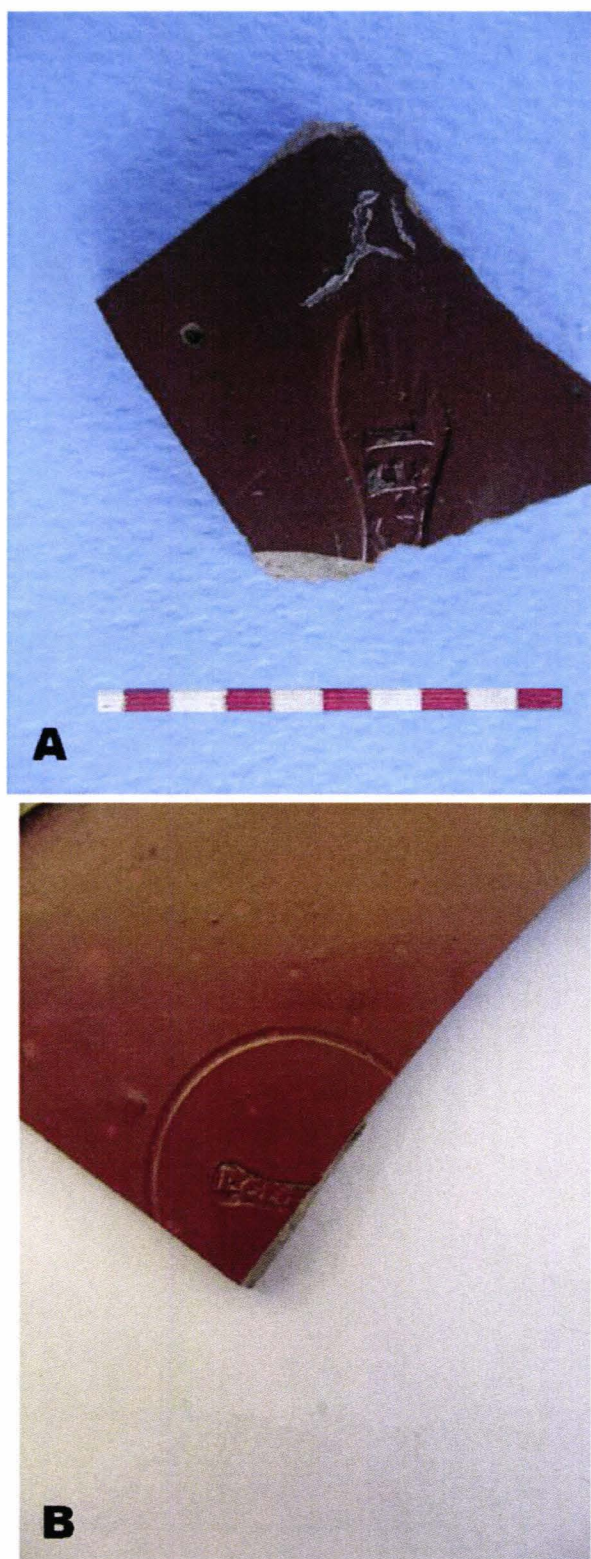


Fig. 14. *Terra sigillata* pieces with the stamps in from of *planta pedis*. Manufacturers: A. Lucius Gellius (here: ... **GEL**) and B. Clodius (here: **P.CLO** ...).

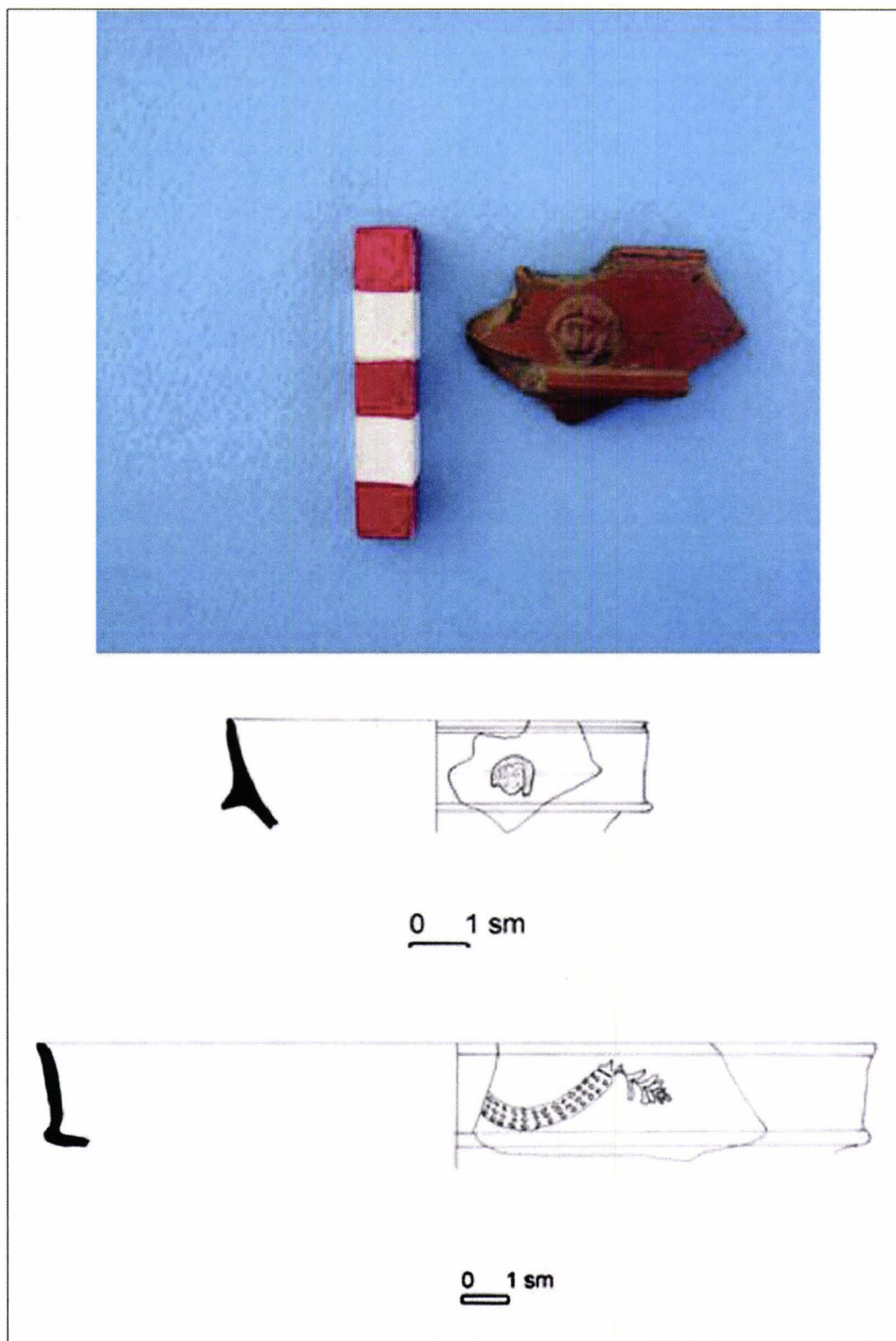


Fig. 15. Fragment of relief *terra sigillata* – decorations with head of Gorgona Medusa and garlands.



Fig. 16. Early Christian tomb with semi-cylindrical vault from Yaliata necropolis
general view of the complex.